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12 January 1983

POSSIBLE MOTIVES BEHIND THE NORTH KOREAN-LIBYAN LINK

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1.1 Introduction

In an earlier memorandum I have examined some of the potential outputs which the North Korean-Libyan Friendship Treaty could produce. This, however, leaves unanswered the important question of possible inputs which made this link possible in the first place. In other words, what were the motives of the parties involved in concluding the present pact. As was indicated, the treaty potentially influences both the conventional and the nuclear proliferation aspects of the North-South Korean military balance. Under this hypothesis, it seems fit to examine possible political and strategic motivations of four actors--North Korea, China, the Soviet Union and Libya--for seeking to presently influence the military status quo on the Korean peninsula via these two weapons' categories.

Before examining the motives of each of the parties (potentially) involved, a general comment needs to be made. It is possible to dismiss the entire case presented in these memos by arguing that if either of the parties was indeed interested in the outputs which were identified it would likely opt for a secret rather than a well-publicized pact. This especially with regard to the claim that the treaty could be viewed as a strategic warning of a North Korean offensive planned against the South.

However, it should be recalled that Soviet bilateral friendship treaties, often the model for Communist contractual undertakings, have on numerous occasions been used for laying down the infrastructure for significant strategic moves planned by one of the contracting parties. This inspite of the fact that none of these pacts was kept secret. For example, Article 9 of the Indo-Soviet friendship treaty, which was signed in August 1971, was applied to the Indo-Pakistani war, which India launched in December of that year.¹

¹See [redacted] The Evolution of Soviet Security Strategy 1965-1975. New York: Crane Russak, 1978), p. 82.

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Article 4 of the December 5, 1978 Soviet-Afghan friendship treaty was used as a basis for legitimizing the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan a year later.² Further, Article 6 of the November 1978 Soviet-Vietnamese friendship treaty was designed to provide the Vietnamese with the necessary anti-Chinese umbrella to protect Hanoi's planned invasion of Kampuchea (December 1978) and was actively applied during the ensuing Sino-Vietnamese border war of 1979.³

Lastly, although one may argue that disclosure of the DPRK-Libyan treaty has reinforced political rather than military interpretations of the pact, it is important to keep in mind the possibility of secret clauses or even deception.⁴

1.2 An Independent North Korean Initiative

The probability of the current move toward Libya being an independent North Korean initiative seems due to the fact that:

...massive military aid by the PRC (to the DPRK) cannot be expected in light of Beijing's relations with the U.S. as well as the Soviet Union and its intention to preserve the status quo on the peninsula.⁵

By some standards the "independent initiative" hypothesis could be viewed as potentially the most dangerous alternative. For instance, Japanese Foreign Ministry sources indicated it was the North Koreans who insisted on Article 4 being incorporated into the treaty. In terms of the

²See Pravda (December 30, 1979), Literaturnaya Gazetta (January 1, 1980).

³See [] "Impact of Sino-Japanese Treaty on the Soviet Security Strategy" Asian Survey (June 1979), pp. 558-573.

⁴Neither has its publication altered the perception of ROK leaders. Embassy officials in Washington expressed "surprise" over the document and termed it "a military alliance." (Personal communication with the author).

⁵Korea Herald (Seoul) (19 September 1982).

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conventional military balance on the peninsula, this could signal Pyongyang is seeking to bend the balance in its favor primarily via upgrading its airforce. This, in turn, may open up the DPRK's option of launching a war against the South.

In this regard, Japanese sources perceived the most disturbing outcome as involving transfer of Libyan MIG-23s to the DPRK. It was pointed out that although the DPRK is currently short of cash--a fact which would tend to limit bilateral arms transfers--two other avenues exist which may outflank this difficulty:

- (1) A hardware for software deal--this would involve Korean maintenance of Libyan arms stocks in exchange for supply of Libyan weapons to the DPRK. No cash will be involved.
- (2) Libya could transfer one or two models of the MIG-23s to the North for the Koreans to copy and manufacture themselves.

The presumed military motives of the North Koreans could be applied to possible nuclear aspirations as well.⁶ Accordingly, Pyongyang may be seeking to nullify the U.S. nuclear deterrent on the peninsula and increase the potential costs of America's involvement in the defense of the ROK. This, the Koreans might surmise, would tend to undermine domestic American support for continued military presence on the peninsula and enhance the North's conventional military option. In short, the acquisition of a nuclear option could be viewed by Pyongyang as contributing in more than one way toward prospects of communizing the peninsula.⁷

⁶As indicated in my earlier memo, Article 4 of the treaty is not limited to conventional arms. This could signal a DPRK effort to get nuclear material and know how via Libya's involvement in the "Islamic bomb" project.

⁷Whether true or false, Western perceptions of North Korea as a potentially "crazy" state would seem to enhance both the perceived incentive to acquire a nuclear option as well as the politico-strategic impacts (on the outside world) of such an acquisition.

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Additionally, the North Koreans might view a nuclear option as essentially circumventing apparent constraints in Soviet and Chinese conventional arms deliveries or as a bargaining chip which could force these powers to lift such limitations. In terms of the North-South military balance a North Korean nuclear option could be perceived as:

- (1) The great "equalizer", i.e., it is possible that Pyongyang, in light of the above mentioned Soviet and Chinese arms limitations is worried about a conventional imbalance developing in the South's favor.
- (2) A nuclear weapons option could be also viewed as an adequate response to Seoul's own growing nuclear infrastructure.

Alternatively, conceivable interpretations of a DPRK's initiative rooted in political motives are also possible. Among these are:

- (1) The DPRK has been trying to increase its bargaining power vis-a-vis both the PRC and the Soviet Union. Independent access to a source of sophisticated weapons could be construed in Pyongyang as intended to alarm Moscow and Beijing, thus increasing the North's leverage in political, economic and arms negotiations with the two Communist powers.
- (2) Kim-il Song is seeking to counterbalance Seoul's promotion of relations with the Third World countries, particularly following President Chon Tu-hwan's visit to four African nations and Canada.

It should be noted, however, that the political benefits which Pyongyang might expect from its link with Libya could supplement some of the military goals listed above which would hardly reduce the latter's probability.

1.3 A Soviet "North Korean Card"

The probability of a Soviet sponsored link is influenced by:

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- (1) The likelihood that deliveries of Soviet built advanced weapons currently stocked in Libya to North Korea will have to be sanctioned by Moscow.
- (2) North Korean-Libyan military links have generally followed closely the pattern of Soviet policy in the area. Thus with the abrogation by Egypt of its friendship treaty with the Soviet Union in 1976, Moscow had shifted its power base to Libya, Egypt's rival, and so did the North Koreans who up to that point maintained a sizable military mission in Egypt.

The conventional arms aspect of the treaty provides one of the possible Soviet motives for masterminding such a link. In addition to repaying North Korea for its military support of Iran, Moscow might be seeking to deal with Pyongyang via Libya in the context of Sino-Soviet and Sino-American ties. In other words, increasing indirect military ties to North Korea could serve as a potential pressure point on the PRC in its dealing with the Soviet Union. Also, Moscow may believe such a pressure point would significantly affect U.S.-ROK and Sino-American relations. It thus seems obvious that North Korea is potentially useful for Moscow in its dealings with both China and the U.S. The distance between Moscow and Pyongyang is a function of how tense are Sino-Soviet and/or Soviet-American relations perceived to be by the Russians.

The Kremlin leadership might also view establishment of a Soviet-DPRK-Libyan "axis" as an alternative course of action should current efforts at Sino-Soviet rapprochement fail. The strategic goal would likely be the prevention of a Sino-U.S.-Japanese axis from emergence. It should be noted that in light of chairman Andropov's early initiatives, the Sino-Soviet conflict is high on the Soviet leader's agenda. This might indicate that an unsatisfactory outcome could convince Andropov of the need to take alternative and more forceful action.

A much starker interpretation seeks to link the Libyan-Korean pact with other Soviet moves evident on the periphery of the USSR. In particular, it may be argued that the Soviets are positioning themselves as to

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be able to open up a two-pronged geostrategic offensive: one in Iran, following Khomeini's death, while simultaneously increasing military pressure on the Korean peninsula. It is important to note that whether the Soviets are actively sponsoring the Korean-Libyan alliance or not, it opens up the option for the Soviets to seize this development in adapting a multi-pressure strategy against U.S. deployments and position on the periphery of the USSR.⁸

There is some evidence to Soviet preparations in both theaters which could be related to the above scenario:

- (1) Reports have indicated the Soviet Union has nearly completed six airfields in southern Afghanistan that will put Iran and the Persian Gulf within range of Soviet jet fighters.⁹
- (2) As part of a regrouping of Soviet forces, a southern command, under Marshal Sokolov has been put up to control the military district of Turkestan, central Asia and Transcaucus.

⁸Note in this regard recent warnings by UNC Commander Gen. Robert Sennneworad that "the emergence of a new generation in the North Korean military leadership highly indoctrinated and Soviet-trained for modern warfare, might significantly increase the danger of miscalculation." Cited in Korea Times (Seoul) (18 September 1982).

⁹New York Times (14 November 1982), The Sunday Telegraph (8 August 1982) detailed the "building up of a vast military infrastructure (by the Russians) which before another 30 months have passed, will enable them to dominate the entire southeast region--Iran, Pakistan, the Indian Ocean and the Persian Gulf all included. Indeed, in concert with their political ally, India, the Russians could use this same network to challenge China to the east." The paper identified Bagram, north of Kabul, Shindand, Qandahar and Jalalabad in the south and west of the country, as airbases which are "being extended." In addition "completely new airfields operating or under construction" were built by the Russians in Farah and Herat (facing Iran); and Serdeh Band, near the Pakistan border, and at Askargh, near Qandahar.

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- (3) At the same time all through 1982 "Slow but significant expansion" of Soviet land, air and sea forces in the West Pacific has been detected.¹⁰ This has involved efforts to extend Soviet access to Vietnamese air and sea facilities.¹¹ Also, an apparent hardening of Soviet position regarding the Kurile Islands' dispute with Japan has been noted during the recent meeting between Soviet Foreign Minister A. Gromyko and his (then) Japanese counterpart Y. Sakurauchi.¹²
- (4) The imminent introduction of Soviet SA-5 missiles--a strategic weapon system--into Syria indicates the firmness of Soviet intention to continue to keep Syria in its zone of influence apparently as part of an overall Soviet southern tier concept. Thus the escalation was undoubtedly derived from the geopolitical significance of the growing Syrian-Iranian military link which Moscow has consistently encouraged and, on occasion, actively facilitated. The disturbing features of the SA-5 deployment include: its potential impact on Sixth Fleet operations in

¹⁰New York Times (30 December 1982).

¹¹See reactions of Thai and Malaysian officials to a statement by Vietnamese Foreign Minister Nguyen Co Thach on July 30, 1982 that the SRV was leaving the door open on possible Soviet base rights. Kuala Lumpur Domestic Service (3 August 1982), FBIS, Daily Report (Asia and Pacific) (6 August 1982), p. 04, AFP (from Bangkok) (26 August 1982) in FBIS, Daily Report (26 August 1982), p. J1.

¹²Kyodo (Tokyo) (5 October 1982). Gromyko used the opportunity to reiterate Soviet demands that Japan sign a friendship treaty with the Soviet Union. The treaty obviously is another device intended to block formation of a U.S.-Japan-China axis.

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the Eastern Mediterranean and access routes over southernmost Turkey; a Soviet willingness to commit its own combat forces (to man the missile sites); and Soviet army insistence on making Syria a secure base for its power projection missions in the Middle East potentially influencing future RDF missions.

Since this paper assumes that currently the Soviets lack any interest in Pyongyang's acquiring a nuclear weapons option, no discussion of possible Soviet motives in this regard has been included.

1.4 A Chinese Sponsored DPRK-Libyan Link

The probability of a Chinese masterminded alliance is influenced by:

- (1) Colonel Quaddafi went to Pyongyang following a state visit to the PRC, where he likely discussed the forthcoming treaty.
- (2) Beijing is the only power which is tightly linked to North Korea and Pakistan if the nuclear proliferation aspect of the deal is considered.

The conventional arms aspect of the treaty could have been motivated by a Chinese desire to circumvent direct Soviet-North Korean arms links. This in the face of Beijing's own recognized inability to provide Pyongyang with sophisticated weapons--a topic which no doubt was raised during Kim-il Song's September visit to China.

Accordingly, it was the Chinese who reportedly sought reconciliation with Libya following a fairly marked deterioration in relations between the two countries.¹³

The above logic could have even "spilled" into the nuclear aspect of the treaty. Given China's ambiguous position on nuclear proliferation it

¹³AFP (Beijing) (21 October 1982) according to diplomatic sources in the Chinese capital.

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is possible that it would back Pyongyang's nuclear aspirations in order to block greater DPRK dependency on the Soviet Union for conventional arms. Beijing's calculations may be that a larger flow of sophisticated Soviet conventional weapons to the North constitute a greater immediate threat to Chinese interests as well as to the Peninsula itself, than the "delayed" threat of nuclear proliferation. In other words, China may have opted for what it perceived as the "appearance" of "rectifying" the military balance rather than consenting to actual Korean efforts to do so.

Either way, it is possible that China is seeking to play its North Korean "card" vis-a-vis Washington. Accordingly the Pyongyang-Tripoli alliance might be viewed by PRC leaders as a potential pressure point to wrest concessions from an America which, in its aftermath, is concerned over prospects of North Korea upsetting the strategic status quo on the peninsula. The Chinese may be acting out of the belief that under such circumstances China will be asked by Washington to exert its influence and restrain the North. Beijing services will be available but for a price (e.g., Taiwan). The North Korean pay off might consist of the U.S. agreeing to reconsider its planned arms deliveries to the South. In short, the PRC, due to its current difficulties with Washington, could have embarked on a policy designed to aggravate U.S. concerns in the Far East in order to boost its potential value in American eyes.

1.5 Possible Libyan Motives

Although Article 4 seems to be the core of the treaty insofar as North Korea is concerned, Article 5 which implies some form of a North Korean "umbrella" against U.S., Egyptian "aggression" must have figured heavily in Quaddafi's calculations favoring the deal. Here the possibility of North Korean pilots defending Libya against SIDRA II or Egyptian air-strikes a la 1977 could not be overlooked.

In general Quaddafi seems interested in establishing some sort of a Libyan-Iranian-North Korean axis as a constellation with dual purposes:

- (1) Radicalize the Middle East-Persian Gulf region.
- (2) Support the Ethiopian-PDRY-Libyan axis already in place.

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Thus it was reported that the Libyan leader has recently offered the Khomeini regime financial aid "to finish and start the operation of the Iranian atomic energy facilities." According to the report, Quaddafi's offer was accepted.¹⁴ Given North Korean military and political support for Iran, it is not inconceivable that Pyongyang will benefit from a Libyan involvement in Iran's nuclear program now that the treaty is in place and the other leg of the axis is anchored in extensive Iranian-Korean military links. This also reinforces the concerns voiced in this paper over the potential nuclear proliferation aspect of the North Korean-Libyan treaty.

Table 1 below summarizes the various arguments raised in this paper.

¹⁴Free Voice of Iran (Clandestine) (12 October 1982) in FBIS, Daily Report (South Asia), (13 October 1982), p. 16.

Weapons
Category
Motives of

IMPACT ON CONVENTIONAL ARMS BALANCE
MILITARY POLITICAL

IMPACT ON NUCLEAR PROLIFERATION POTENTIAL
MILITARY POLITICAL

NORTH KOREA	<p>-Upsetting military balance with South via upgrading of air force</p> <p>-Opening up of war option against ROK</p>	<p>-Circumventing arms limitations posed by China and Soviet Union elevates independent image of DPRK as a true non-aligned nation</p> <p>-Reduces international isolation</p> <p>-Counter to ROK Third World Initiative</p>	<p>-Effort to get to nuclear material and know how via "Islamic Bomb" Project</p> <p>-Nuclear option as an effective solution to problem of U.S. TNFs on peninsula</p> <p>-Bargaining chip in conventional arms negotiations with Soviets and PRC</p> <p>-Undermine U.S. domestic support for continued military presence in ROK</p>
SOVIET UNION	<p>-Active interest in prevention of U.S.-Japan-China axis may lead to endorsement of increased military pressure on ROK</p> <p>-Allow for a possible two pronged global offensive strategy</p>	<p>-War option to be used as bargaining chip in Sino-Soviet and Soviet-American relations</p>	<p>-"Crazy" state problem: first use against South not inconceivable</p> <p>-No interest in DPRK development of nuclear option</p> <p>-No interest in DPRK development of a nuclear option</p>
CHINA	<p>-"Rectification" of growing imbalance in military might with ROK to fend off North Korean preemption</p>	<p>-Substituting DPRK-Soviet arms links via alternative source of sophisticated arms: Libya</p> <p>-Arouse U.S. concerns to wrest American concessions</p>	<p>-Military application of nuclear option by DPRK believed not in PRC's current interest</p> <p>-Ambiguous stand on nuclear proliferation: Diverting DPRK to long range nuclear option solution rather than being pressed for sophisticated conventional arms now</p> <p>-Arouse U.S. concerns to wrest American concessions</p>
LIBYA	<p>-DPRK "umbrella" against SIDRA II, Egyptian incursion, etc.</p>	<p>-Creation of N.K.-Libya-Iran axis to radicalize area and support PDRY-Ethiopia-Libya axis</p>	<p>-"Crazy" state problem: general philosophy of damaging U.S. interests worldwide might lead to seeing nuclear confrontation in an area remote from Libya as desirable</p>